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Does Microblogging Have a Future in Your Organization?



by Michael Geraci

Just as you were finally able to convince your department head or IT director that your organization could benefit from the timely and highly specialized communications afforded by a major blogging implementation for some of your internal or external communications, it might be time to go back and make the case for an even more curious and technological solution: a microblog solution.

In practice, microblogging [1] is the conflation of blogging and text messaging. Born from the lust for instantaneous communications among one's peers that made social networking sites, like MySpace [2] and FaceBook [3] such phenomena among today's youth, microblogging has emerged as a potentially useful tool for small organizations and/or multi-functional workgroups in an organization that do not work in close proximity to one another. By harnessing Web 2.0 constructs like content tagging (a' la flickr [4] and del.ici.ous [5]) and friend-following (as in LinkedIn [6], FaceBook, Digg [7]), microblogging has emerged as an instant communications medium that is potentially more powerful than good ol' e-mail and instant messaging.

While there are over 100 microblogging sites and services available, Twitter [8] seems to have captured the vast majority of attention in its short two-year history. If you haven't heard of Twitter, it is really a simple concept. As a user, you are able to send out short (as in one or two sentence long) text messages that are delivered instantly to those who have chosen to follow your "feed". As such, Twitter messages, called "tweets", tend to be highly timely and topical. For example: "Going to buy tickets for tonight's premiere. Let me know if you're in." Twitter messages can be composed and sent through the free service from any computer or mobile device that is connected to the Internet, and there are even low-cost services that transcribe voice messages sent

from a phone and post them to your Twitter feed. Those who subscribe to your feed can receive the message in just about any mode including e-mail, text message, FaceBook, and through dedicated applications available for mobile devices.

It is estimated that Twitter had over 3 million users as of September 2008 including Barack Obama [9] who is the most followed Twitter user to date. Obama has over 130,000 people following his tweets, which he, himself composed and sent out with some frequency while on the campaign trail, including this one on November 5, 2008,

We just made history. All this happened because you gave your time, talent and passion. All of this happened because of you. Thanks. [10]

Obama has since ceased his Twitter efforts, perhaps to make room for Twitter's next big celebrity, Brittany Spears, who likes to keep her fans informed of her trips to the grocery store with the kids.

Despite its popularity and accessibility, Twitter is ill-suited for workplace communications. Anybody in the world can choose to follow anyone else, and the somewhat generic architecture of Twitter lacks the features that could benefit targeted and threaded communications among co-workers. A new start-up has emerged to fill this role, in Hollywood-based Yammer [11]. Yammer caught the tech-industry spotlight when it won the top prize in September 2008's TechCrunch50 [12] conference, where 50 tech start-ups are vetted by a handful of industry moguls. The most promising product or service receives 50,000 dollars in venture capital.

Yammer is free to anyone with a corporate e-mail account, i.e., gmail users need not apply. Individuals that share the same corporate e-mail domain can use Yammer to send, receive, and organize private communications which can include images, documents, and videos. The idea being that co-workers involved in collaborative efforts can have instant, timely, and threaded discussions in a dedicated application. If it

sounds like just another way to do e-mail or instant messaging, it's not. Yammer is free from all the clutter and noise that has become inherent in our e-mail in-boxes, and it includes numerous features that add value to the traditional instant messaging model.

Chief among the advantageous features in Yammer is the ability to follow certain discussions, people, or projects rather than all of the Yammer messages (yammerings?) being sent throughout the organization.

Let's say I am involved in a project that includes a small subset of employees in my company. I can choose to follow just the messages from all those involved in the



project, or just certain individuals with whom I am working most closely. I can create groups of the Yammer users in the company and track their discussions, or, thanks to content tagging, I can filter out all communications except those that have been tagged as being relevant to a particular project or subject in which I am interested. For example, if I'm involved in a company-wide re-branding effort, I can send out a message like "Where are we with the latest #logo design?" to the design team. The pound sign (#) designates the word "logo" as subject matter that can now be followed as discussions proceed. Whenever other users include the #logo tag in their messages or respond to tagged messages, I will receive them.

When it comes to sending and receiving these communications, Yammer makes it easy. As a Yammer user, I can engage in discussions through a variety of applications that provide me with access regardless of where I

am. There is a Web browser-based Yammer client, a desktop application (built on the Adobe AIR [13] platform), and Blackberry and iPhone clients. Yammer messages can also be sent and received via e-mail, instant messaging, and SMS text messages, making it virtually impossible to miss out on discussions.

If the IT folks are concerned about security, network traffic, or managing users, a fee-based system can be implemented where Yammer provides administration services that include such things as limiting access to specific individuals or I.P. addresses, requiring passwords, and establishing permissions for what messages or groups users can follow. This administration service costs organizations 1 dollar per user per month.

Tech entrepreneur, Jason Calcanis, who uses Yammer among his employees at his user-powered search service, *Mahalo* [14], says "Any company which isn't running Yammer right now is missing out on the best communications and productivity tool available in the market today. It's a massive game changer." Whether or not this is true for all types of organizations, it is nice to see that Web 2.0 technologies are maturing in ways that can bring new found utility and benefit to today's diverse work environments.

[1] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microblogging>

[2] <http://www.myspace.com/>

[3] <http://www.facebook.com/>

[4] <http://www.flickr.com/>

[5] <http://delicious.com/>

[6] <http://www.linkedin.com/>

[7] <http://digg.com/>

[8] <http://twitter.com/>

[9] <http://twitter.com/barackobama>

[10] <http://twitter.com/BarackObama/status/992176676>

[11] <https://www.yammer.com/>

[12] <http://www.techcrunch50.com/2008/>

[13] <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2008/02/geraci.php>

[14] <http://www.mahalo.com/>